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APPLICATION OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE
CONCEPT TO ASSESS USAF ORGANIZATIONS

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Contents

	<i>Page</i>
DISCLAIMER	ii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE BASICS.....	1
UNDERSTANDING THE TERM “ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE”	6
AIR FORCE LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE	11
DIFFICULTY IN APPLYING ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE CONCEPTS	18
METHODS OF ORGANIZATIONAL ASSESSMENT.....	21
Caroselli’s informal group method.....	22
Corporate Culture Questionnaire.....	25
The Twenty Statements Test	26
Additional thoughts on the assessment tools	27
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH.....	30
APPENDIX A: SCHEIN’S WAYS OF TALKING TOGETHER	33
APPENDIX B: TST INSTRUMENT AND SAMPLE RESULTS TABLE	34
BIBLIOGRAPHY	35

Tables

Table 1 : Modified Questions from Caroselli's Method.....	23
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Abstract

Recent studies have shown a correlation exists between a strong organizational culture and organizational effectiveness. In fact, some studies question the relative benefit of leadership to organizational effectiveness versus a strong organizational culture. Therefore, can a leader improve or maintain organizational productivity when armed with an understanding its culture? With a high turnover rate and destabilizing organizational dynamics (Major Command reorganizations, force downsizing etc.), it is vital for USAF commanders or leaders to assess and, therefore, determine the strength of their organization's culture. This research paper presents rationale for the utility of applying the organizational culture body of knowledge to assist Air Forces leaders in accurately assessing their organization's culture and using this information to improve the effectiveness of the organization.

A qualitative review of current studies and professional literature is conducted to provide a contextual perspective of organizational culture. In addition, methods to assess organizational culture are reviewed. Also included are recommendations for further research to explore in greater detail the appropriate application of organizational culture research to USAF organizations.

Chapter 1

Organizational Culture Basics

I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him, he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

President Eisenhower's statement reflects the nature of leadership in today's USAF organizational environment illustrating the importance of establishing rapport, understanding, and loyalty from the outset in a leader/subordinate relationship. This statement extrapolated to address the leader/organization relationship further underscores the importance of leaders establishing the same rapport, understanding, and loyalty within the organization as a whole.

In their article "Understanding and Applying Transformational Leadership," Majors Donohue and Wong point to *identification* and *internalization* as two follower reactions that achieve commitment.¹ Specifically, these terms describe attitude changes which increase an individual's productive performance within an organization. The focus is on leader/follower influence vice a more pervasive influence which permeates the entire organization. Donohue and Wong assume that attitude change is sometimes called for and that a leader can influence each subordinate to reflect the behaviors necessary for a unit to accomplish its mission. Accomplishing an all encompassing organizational influence,

however, requires a macro-oriented approach. Therefore, Eisenhower's quote might be appropriately altered to state: "I would rather try to persuade an *organization* to go along, because once I have persuaded *the organization*, it will stick. If I scare *the organization*, *the individual's who make up my organization* will stay just as long as *they are* scared, and then *they are* gone." This alteration highlights the broader view that a leader should take in assessing his/her organization.

A leader objectively determining his organization's culture derives several benefits. Review of studies showing a correlation between strong organizational culture and organizational effectiveness leads to the conclusion that a leader can improve or maintain high organizational productivity by understanding and assuring a strong internal organizational culture.² Just as an instructor assesses a student's academic skills before assigning an appropriate course of study, so should a leader assess cultural status to gain a greater understanding of the organization and how best to operate in its cultural environment before implementing any major changes.

In the recently released USAF document entitled "Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century," Chief of Staff of the Air Force General Ronald Fogleman recognizes the importance of the concept of organizational culture to Air Force leadership as he states: "the Air Force of tomorrow and beyond must encourage individuals to be comfortable with uncertainty and willingness to make decisions with less than perfect information. Accordingly, our people must understand the doctrine, ***culture*** [emphasis added] and competencies of the Air Force as a whole - in addition to mastering their own specialties."³ This statement identifies a cultural influence which permeates the Air Force and which, in the future, must reflect the values, beliefs and practices embodied by this

vision statement. Meryl Louis refers to the “corporate culture” as that which exists at the “top of an organization” and states that this culture is “the more public view presented.”⁴ However, Fogleman’s statement also recognizes subcultural breakdowns within various specialties which comprise an Air Force organization. These subcultures, which may vary significantly at different levels within the larger organization, ultimately contribute to (or detract from) the productivity and effectiveness of the organization as a whole. Therefore, applying an understanding of organizational culture to subculture groups within the Air Force is beneficial.

Several years ago, the Air Force began using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to provide its members and their leadership with a tool to gain further insight into “psychological type.”⁵ The tool provides a measure of various personality behavior preferences associated with each type (i.e., extrovert vs. introvert, sensor vs. intuitive etc.) In parallel, the theory of organizational culture provides interesting ideas and perspectives with which to view organizations and their “personality” preferences. Thus, if the organizational culture concept is to prove useful to commanders and supervisors, practical tools must be developed to enable leaders to assess existing organizational culture influences in the workplace environment. Farrell, in his graduate research paper on organizational culture’s relationship to job satisfaction, suggests that individuals could be matched to identifiable work environments.⁶ Farrell comments on Koberg and Chusmir’s study of types of organizational culture and organizational variables which explore the “notion of a cultural match” and state that “individual job performance is a function of the match or fit between the individual’s needs (motivation) and the organization’s culture.”⁷

Organizational assessment tools similar conceptually to the MBTI could be applied to allow leaders a holistic view of their organization and its established cultural norms.

To establish the framework for reviewing assessment tools, a qualitative review of current studies and professional literature was conducted to provide a contextual perspective of the organizational culture theory. The scope of the literature review involves defining the term “organizational culture” and its ascribed characteristics by various researchers in the fields of ethnography and anthropology. Current definitional attributes are discussed ending with the proposed application of a baseline definition prescribed by Edward Schein.

Having established this baseline definition, relating the organizational culture concept to leadership with its relevant benefits provides a backdrop for the review of current organizational culture assessment methods. As with any organizational analysis where conclusions are drawn and acted upon, individuals must be aware of potential impediments which can impact the leader’s interpretation of data. Understanding these issues and their applicability, given appropriate circumstances, adds greater fidelity to a leader’s assessment of his/her organizational culture.

To aid in such an assessment, three tools used for evaluating an organization’s culture are described and the administration process for each is presented. Conclusions are drawn concerning the tools’ potential application by Air Force leadership in conjunction with issues to consider in their application.

To provide a more comprehensive view of the topic, further research is recommended to evaluate how organizational culture assessment complements current USAF efforts to enhance organizational effectiveness. Likewise, additional research applying culture

assessment methods to selected USAF organizations will provide case study data to assist decision makers in determining the merits of organizational culture theory's institutional application.

Notes

¹ Kevin S. Donohue and Leonard Wong, "Understanding and Applying Transformational Leadership," *Military Review*, 1 August 1994, 26.

² W. James Weese, "Do Leadership and Organizational Culture Really Matter?" *Journal of Sports Management*, 1 Apr 1996, 197-205.

³ Department of the Air Force, *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century*, (1996), 19.

⁴ Peter J. Frost, *Organizational Culture* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 77-78.

⁵ Isabel B. Myers, *Introduction to Type*, Revised by Linda K. Kirby & Katherine D. Myers, 5th ed. (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc., 1993), 1.

⁶ Sean M. Farrell, "Organizational Cultures and Values As They Impact on Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment" Research Report (Wright State University, 1993), 15.

⁷ Quoted in Sean M. Farrell, "Organizational Cultures and Values as They impact on Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment," Research Report (Wright State University, 1993), 15.

Chapter 2

Understanding the term “Organizational Culture”

To understand the concept of organizational culture, it is imperative to review current definitions ascribed to the term. Schein recognizes the “fuzziness” of the term “culture” and provides context by focusing on the commonality between most definitions; namely, “the idea that certain things in groups are shared or held in common.”¹ Schein points out that the term “culture” alludes to two “critical elements”: structural stability and integration.² The first element, structural stability, refers to a set of commonly held beliefs “deep” within the organization, not easily identifiable when viewing surface behaviors and practices.³ These deeply held beliefs and/or values distinguish one organizational culture from another and establish the organization’s identity. Examples might be the degree of trust or confidence in the organization’s leadership or the level of dependence or independence allowed employees within the organization. The second element, *integration*, is noted by Schein as the myriad of behavior patterns, “rituals, climates, and values” that combine to mold the organization’s identity.⁴ For example, when viewing the “Pentagon,” one thinks of the building, military organizational structure, high-level decision-making, bureaucratic machinations etc. all of which form an outsider’s perception of the “Pentagon’s” culture.

Cooke and Rousseau describe the environment in which culture exists and the control exerted on the individual employee as a result: “culture provides a pre-made and socially shared enacted environment to which the individual must accommodate in order to fit in and, in certain cases, to survive.”⁵ This paints a rather monolithic picture of organizational culture but serves to further stress the importance of understanding the cultural surroundings in an organization. Koburg and Chusmir define culture as “a system of shared values and beliefs that produce norms of behavior and establish an organizational way of life.”⁶ They go on to assert that culture provides a shared identity among employees thus contributing to esprit de corps and unity within the organization. Additionally, a foundation for decision-making is created upon which members share a common understanding.⁷

In defining organizational culture, Farrell proposes that both formal and informal networks where “communication and interaction” are present must exist, as organizational culture cannot develop without pervasive communication. Farrell argues that, without communication, transference of values, beliefs and norms is impossible.⁸ He presents a broad view of communication in which all forms of human contact, whether verbal, physical, emotional or otherwise, are included. On the physical side, for example, a leader transitioning into his/her organization focuses on the self-evident “artifacts” which characterize the organization. Artifacts are defined by Schein as those “phenomena that one sees, hears, and feels when one encounters a new group with an unfamiliar culture.”⁹ Such tangibles as organizational charts, seating arrangements, personal appearance standards, and overtly stated values are illustrative artifacts and are examples of physical communication. Organizational charts serve a key purpose by exhibiting in graphical form

the official interrelationships of the individuals and groups within an organization. The word “official” is a key semantic in the previous sentence because a new leader should be sensitive to the potential for unofficial interaction and an informal “pecking order” within his/her group. Seating arrangements may communicate a status level as might perks such as having a “window office.” Lax standards of appearance may indicate loose discipline, declining morale or a disregard for authority within the organization. However, before drawing definitive conclusions, it is important to identify the official policy and procedural standards as documented within, for example, “standard operating procedures” of an organization. All of these artifacts communicate and reinforce the culture embraced by an organization.

Gerald Pepper, author of “Communicating in Organizations: a Cultural Approach” reviews Smircich’s three alternative descriptions of culture as an “external variable,” “internal variable,” or “psychodynamic process.” Relative to the “external variable” descriptor, Pepper states that culture is imported from outside the organization “reflecting the values, beliefs, attitudes etc. of the host culture.”¹⁰ To illustrate, Ott cites Ouchi et al. and their example of a U.S. firm attempting to replicate Japanese “management practices.”¹¹ They contend that the disparate national culture prohibits precise replication of such practices: the Japanese culture being more paternalistic, loyalty-based, noncompetitive, and hierarchical versus the competitive, independent nature of American culture.¹²

Second, Smircich discusses culture as an internal variable wherein “transactions of the participants within the organization result in a social reality that may or may not reflect the culture outside the organization.”¹³ For example, anecdotal contentions that military

culture with its focus on strict morality, structure and a rigid set of norms (e.g., “don’t ask don’t tell” policy) does not reflect the social norms which predominate within the American culture at-large.

Third, Smircich views “culture as a psychodynamic process” such that the organization is a reflection of the “psychological states of the individuals who comprise the organization.”¹⁴ Presumably, a leader’s ability to establish an organizational vision combined with his/her charisma and/or motivational skills has a more significant impact relative to this organizational culture dynamic.¹⁵

Nord, explores leadership impact in his essay *Can Organizational Culture be Managed? A Synthesis*. He metaphorically refers to culture as the “glue that binds parts of an organization together.”¹⁶ While an appropriate metaphor, it is important to emphasize that the metaphor applies only insofar as various parts of an organization share the same organizational values, beliefs and underlying basic assumptions.

Throughout organizational culture literature, Edgar Schein’s definition is referenced numerous times as one which captures the essence of the concept and for purposes of this research it is deemed appropriately comprehensive. Thus, the following definition of organizational culture borrowed from Schein will be used hereafter: “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”¹⁷

Throughout the literature it’s apparent that the academic community is wrestling with the proper definition and description of the term organizational culture and the myriad

descriptions and alternative definitions above provide a broad, albeit not exhaustive, view of these descriptions to further enhance the leader's understanding of the organizational culture concept.

Notes

¹ Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. 2nd ed., (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1992), 8.

² Ibid. p. 10

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ R.A. Cooke and D.M. Rousseau, "Behavioral Norms and Expectations: A Quantitative Approach to the Assessment of Organizational Culture," *Group and Organizational Studies* 18 (1988): 248.

⁶ Quoted in Farrell, "Organizational Cultures and Values," 8.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 17.

¹⁰ Gerald L. Pepper, *Communicating in Organizations: A Cultural Approach*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1995), 32 .

¹¹ Ott, J. Steven. *The Organizational Culture Perspective*. (Chicago: The Dorsey Press, 1989), 76.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Pepper, *Communicating in Organizations*, 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., 32-33

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Frost, *Organizational Culture*, 194.

¹⁷ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 12.

Chapter 3

Air Force Leadership and Organizational Culture

The concept of organizational culture and its implications for command are particularly relevant to the Air Force. The current organizational environment within the USAF is characterized by routine leadership turnover and destabilizing organizational dynamics such as Command reorganizations and restructuring. The consolidation in the early 1990s of Air Force Logistics Command and Air Force Systems Command to form Air Force Materiel Command is one example, as well as the transition from the operational Command structures Strategic Air Command and Tactical Air Command to Air Mobility Command and Air Combat Command. Each of these examples represents a top-level organizational change accompanied by corresponding organizational culture change that cascades throughout the command chain. USAF commanders or supervisors can enhance their leadership perspective by determining the organizational culture surrounding them in a new assignment or in units where reorganization needs to occur.

Pepper states that “...only in academia do we operate on an assumption that “research” is valuable in its own right. In organizations, research is valuable to the degree that it can be applied.”¹ The purpose of this research is to determine the degree to which organizational culture research, as it currently stands, can be applied such that a military leader can accurately assess an organization’s culture and use this information to improve

the effectiveness of the organization. In his AWC research paper entitled “An Organizational Culture Perspective of Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change: Shaping the Future of the Army,” Col. John Stevens recognizes that an Army leader cannot exercise the expertise of an organizational behavior scholar or be as independent and unbiased as a researcher.² However, Stevens notes that an understanding of organizational culture concepts provides the leader with the “insight to explain, anticipate, and influence the behavior of organizational members...”³ Due to the fluid turnover of leadership within the military, tools used to enhance the ability of a commander or supervisor to discern the culture of the organization effect smoother transitions and retention of continuity during leadership changes.

Diamond finds that “leadership transitions destabilize organizational identities, shatter object constancy, and trigger deeper feelings of object loss.”⁴ Constant leadership changes carry the risk of disrupting the continuity and momentum of a functional and effective organization. These disruptions are exacerbated when a new leader fails to take the time or expend the intellectual energy to understand the cultural structure (i.e. “basic values, beliefs and practices”) which existed prior to his/her presence on the scene. Rather than assessing the organization and its strengths, the “unenlightened” leader presses forward with an alternative insular agenda that can violate and disrupt the organization’s cultural norms and undermine its effectiveness.

Conversely, tools to aid in assessing organizational culture contribute to ultimately establishing and inculcating organizational change where needed. Discussing the transition of a new leader into an organization, Schein notes that “she or he must have the skill to diagnose accurately what the culture of the organization is, what elements are well

adapted and what elements are problematic...”⁵ As will be detailed later, assessment tools are designed to aid leadership in establishing the state of culture within an organization and, thereby, facilitating its deeper understanding.

Another aspect of organizational culture assessment is to guard against a entrenched environment which, while not necessarily considered dysfunctional, may be static and therefore unreceptive to positive, efficiency enhancing change. As an example, Pepper cites S. P. Feldman’s case study and resultant conclusions that culture can serve as a hindrance to innovation when a leader instills a “culture of dependency” in his workers.⁶ Feldman’s assertion was demonstrated by a founder of an electronics firm who attempted to decentralize decision-making to instill a greater capacity for innovation; however, the employees’ cultural dependence on centralized decision-making disabled the founder’s plans for decentralization.⁷ Thus, the employees were unable to show initiative, or explore potential improvements because of a culture whose business was “handicapped by its style of operating.”⁸ Had the founder accurately assessed the cultural state of his company before implementing procedural changes, he could have developed a plan with better chances of success. Military commanders and supervisors are faced today with enormous challenges involving change and uncertainty. Their ability to plan successfully may be determined, in part, by their understanding of their organization’s culture.

Louis asserts that the theory of organizational culture may be “more useful for understanding smaller, more homogenous organizations.”⁹ This provides a backdrop for the discussion of subcultures within larger organizations. For example, a commander assesses the organizational culture of his squadron by characterizing its own individual culture as well as understanding the general umbrella of the larger organizational

characteristics of the Air Wing.¹⁰ An operational contracting squadron might exhibit overarching cultural characteristics attributable to the Air Wing, such as an emphasis on utilizing process action teams (PAT) for unit problem solving. The squadron commander, recognizing a negative attitude toward PAT teams (e.g., due to a past commander's inappropriate exclusion of civilians from such teams), could establish alternative conditions under which such teams still could be used successfully. For example, renaming them and modifying the approach typically taken in assigning members to such teams to assure more equitable distribution of employee participation.

Recent studies show a correlation between organizational effectiveness and “strong” organizational culture.¹¹ A “strong” organizational culture involves such factors as “increased consensus around strategic direction (Pfeffer, 1981), heightened employee productivity (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Denison 1990; Martin, 1985), and enriched employee commitment (Myerson & Martin, 1987; Ouchi, 1981; Pettigrew, 1979; Smircich, 1983, 1985).”¹² Other researchers identify factors such as “employees attributing role clarity and greater meaning to their work.”¹³ Characteristics such as cohesiveness and a company's effort towards uncovering internal problems also contribute toward a strong organizational culture. Given the number of studies conducted which attribute a concerted link between organizational culture and effectiveness, a reasonable conclusion can be drawn that these implications are worthy of a leader's attention.

In a 1985 study comparing “companies in dynamic industries” to companies in a more static environment (e.g. utilities), Gordon found that, regardless of categorization, a “strong culture” correlates to strong financial performance when measured by return on investment.¹⁴ In a follow-on study, Gordon related adaptability and consistency to strong

organizational performance and found that “both a strong culture from the standpoint of consistency, and an appropriate culture from the standpoint of content, will produce positive results, but a combination of the two is most powerful.”¹⁵ D.R. Denison concluded in his research that “behavioral aspects of organizations were intimately linked to both short-term performance and long-term survival.”¹⁶ Still another study conducted by a group of researchers found that “teamwork was strongly associated with organizational performance” and “if measures of organizational culture could be integrated into the reward system, managers might pay more attention to improving organizational culture and thereby improve organizational performance.”¹⁷

Finally, an understanding of organizational culture can provide an interpretive framework from which an incoming leader can draw information to establish a deeper organizational understanding than what otherwise might be possible in a short period of time. Applying Schein’s basic definition, the leader’s recognition of unique cultures associated with an organization allow for a methodical evaluation of the values, traits, norms and underlying basic assumptions which comprise the organization he/she is tasked to lead. Paxson, in describing what to look for when evaluating a new organization notes that assessing an “organization’s personality” as you enter into a new assignment provides clues to determine its “congruence” to your leadership style or objectives.¹⁸ In addition, Paxson notes the many variable which can shape a culture will provide you with valuable information for determining your approach to being a part of the organization.¹⁹ While he fails to establish a clear method for assessing an organization, Paxson draws conclusions which illustrate the importance of understanding organizational culture as it relates to establishing authority, maintaining productive continuity and identifying the important

characteristics of an organization to allow a leader to begin the process of transitioning the organization to his/her leadership tenure.²⁰

Col. Tim Timmons states in “Commanding an Air Force Squadron” that “the first three months of a new squadron commander’s tour set the tone for the entire tenure.” He likens it to the presidential “honeymoon” period where subordinates and superordinates provide a grace period to the new commander before rendering judgment on his/her leadership capability.²¹ Establishing a firm grasp on the organizational culture within his/her organization allows an Air Force leader to “roadmap” appropriate steps to accomplish the unit’s mission and ensure a successful tenure as a commander or supervisor.

Notes

¹ Pepper, Gerald L. *Communicating in Organizations: a Cultural Approach*. (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1995).

² Stevens, Col. John E., “An Organizational Culture Perspective of Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change: Shaping the Future of the Army,” Research Report (Maxwell AFB, Ala: Air War College, 1983), 13.

³ Ibid., 13-14

⁴ Diamond, Michael A. *The Unconscious Life Of Organizations: Interpreting Organizational Identity*. (Westport, Conn: Quorum Books, 1993), 194.

⁵ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 380.

⁶ Pepper, *Communicating in Organizations*, 31.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Frost, *Organizational Culture*, 77-78.

¹⁰ Ibid., 100.

¹¹ Weese, *Do Leadership and Organizational Culture Really Matter?*, 199.

¹² Ibid. Author cites those listed within the quote presented.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Gordon, George G., “Predicting Corporate Performance from Organizational Culture.” *The journal of management studies*, 29, (Nov 1 1992): 786.

¹⁵ Ibid., 794.

¹⁶ Petty, M.M., N.A. Beadles II, Christopher M. Lowery, Deborah F. Chapman, & David W. Connell. ‘Relationships Between Organizational Culture and Organizational Performance.’ *Psychological reports*. 76, (1 Apr 1995): 486.

¹⁷ Ibid., 483.

Notes

¹⁸ Paxson, Ronald L. "Taking Hold of Your New Job As Soon as Possible." (Maxwell AFB Ala.: Air War College, 1985): 22.

¹⁹ Ibid., 23.

²⁰ Ibid., 20-30.

²¹ Timmons, Timothy T. Commanding an Air Force Squadron, (Maxwell AFB, AL: Air University Press, 1993): 10.

Chapter 4

Difficulty In Applying Organizational Culture Concepts

Application of the organizational culture concept cannot be viewed as a panacea for improved organizational performance, but as a factor for leadership to consider when assessing its effectiveness and productivity. Several difficulties are identified in literature which inhibit or constrain the leadership's ability to apply the concept and derive the benefits mentioned above.

Stevens in his AWC study entitled "An Organizational Culture Perspective of Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change: Shaping the Future of the Army" points out several pitfalls to applying the organizational culture concept. He explores the impact of individuals who lack genuine commitment to organizational values and indicates that the academic struggle for consistency within the relatively new area of organizational culture theory leads to difficulty in application. In particular, he highlights subcultures which contradict or are independent of the current organizational goals and objectives.

Morgan, in discussing Martin and Siehl's types of subculture, states that "a counterculture rejects either all or a part of the core values of a dominant culture."¹ For instance, a counterculture group could develop to disrupt an organization's focus on customer orientation because it threatens an established power hierarchy informally existent within the organization. However, a counterculture can be positive when used to

balance organizational view points. A leader must be aware of and establish some level of control over the counterculture such that it does not undermine the greater interests of the organization as a whole.

Stevens states that within organizational culture contexts there are differences between “what people say and what they do.”² An individual may feign commitment to the prevailing values, beliefs and norms of an organization while practicing on a daily basis activities which run counter to these same values, beliefs and norms. An individual who consistently delays action on items of critical importance to a customer because of “other priorities” contradicts the established institutional “value” that “the customer always comes first.”³ Again, it is up to the leader to identify these outliers and take the appropriate action lest they render the established value irrelevant.

Stevens calls the “interpretation” of organizational culture an “art” rather than an exact science.⁴ Organizational culture research has yet to reach consensus on a number of issues regarding the most appropriate research methods, precise typology, or even whether there is truly a distinction to be made between the terms organizational culture and organizational climate. Pepper agrees with Clifford Geertz’s interpretive approach to culture analysis and Max Weber’s metaphor “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” This leads to his view of culture as “those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”⁵ To a new leader, it is intuitive to evaluate an organization based on what is seen and heard and to make judgments on this information. This intuitive evaluation lends credence to the validity of deriving interpretive meaning according to the cultural characteristics of an organization. However, a less than

methodical or systematic assessment can lead to misinterpretation and invalid conclusions and ultimately result in improper actions taken based on these invalid conclusions. A theoretical understanding of organizational culture manifestations can help to alleviate misinterpretation and ideally provide more extensive cultural information upon which a new leader can draw valid conclusions.

Given convincing evidence which suggests that “strong” organizational culture influenced by leadership sensitivity leads to more effective performance, a review of diagnostic tools available for leadership use is warranted.

Notes

¹ Morgan, Scott, “Air University Faculty Socialization: A Comparative Analysis,” (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, February 1997).

² Stevens, “An Organizational Culture Perspective of Strategic Leadership and Organizational Change: Shaping the Future of the Army,” 17-18.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pepper, *Communicating in Organizations: a Cultural Approach*, 35.

Chapter 5

Methods of Organizational Assessment

In examining the practical applications of organizational culture research, a leader must be aware of the relative subjectivity of such an assessment. One of the controversies surrounding organizational culture analysis centers on the degree of accuracy that can be achieved through various research methods. Researchers are divided along organizational behaviorist/ anthropological lines in debating whether subjective interpretation of a culture yields an accuracy beneficial to the researcher. A quantitative versus qualitative debate rages amongst organizational culture researchers with respect to devices best used to assess culture.¹ Notwithstanding the above contentions, organizational culture has made its way from academia to the practical application domain in the form of tools to assess culture.

A review of methods currently being used to assess organizational culture uncovered three methods particularly worthy of further examination. While these methods are not exhaustive with respect to organizational assessment tools thus far developed, they represent initial attempts to bring the concept's utility to organizational leadership. These methods tend to be less time intensive and less difficult to administer than "large-scale statistical methods."² The three methods discussed are:

- Caroselli's informal group method

- Corporate Culture questionnaire
- Twenty Statements Test

A brief summary of each will point out the characteristics of the method and discuss its relative merit.

Caroselli's informal group method

The health services industry is examining organizational culture tools and their utility in dealing with a dynamic, ever-changing environment not unlike the military: bureaucratization combined with changing technology, mergers and acquisitions.³ Cynthia Caroselli in addressing assessment of the health care organizational setting, combines Linkow's suggestion for "small group brainstorming" with Thomas, Ward, Chorba, and Kumiega's recommendation for asking questions of organizational membership to ascertain its prevailing culture.⁴ Caroselli's use of the small group or "task force" approach is designed to be informal, maintaining a relaxed atmosphere, easing potential employee anxiety, and encouraging greater participation and dialogue."⁵ Before convening the functional representative grouping of employees, she suggests allowing preparation time for the participants to review a set of questions used to frame the group discussions. Caroselli emphasizes the questions are designed to "elicit "what is" rather than "what should be."⁶

Below, is a set of recommended questions designed to elicit feedback from group members. Responses to these questions provide information allowing a leader to exercise judgments on the strength of his/her organizational culture and provide a snapshot from which to take action (or inaction). The list is issued to group members prior to the

group's first meeting. The questions in Table 1 are modified from Caroselli's proposal to be more generic and applicable to military organizations.⁷

Table 1. Modified Questions from Caroselli's Method

- | |
|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What were your first impression when you initially came to this organization/office?2. From this first impression, what factors were most pleasing for you to encounter?3. What factors were most anxiety-provoking?4. What do "they" say about the employees who work in this unit?5. How can you tell that an employee works in this unit?6. What is the most interesting story you ever heard about this organization?7. What do you think this story tells you?8. What is most helpful in contributing to excellent performance in this unit? Why?9. What is the most significant barrier organizational excellence?10. Who in this environment is a hero? Why?11. What does it mean to be "the best"?12. What is the most important lesson good or bad, that you've learned here? How did you learn it? |
|--|

Accurate interpretations may be made concerning the cultural status quo from group discussions conducted after workers have had time to reflect upon the questionnaire. An illustrative response to question 12 might be "an employee recently received a reprimand for a late arrival to work despite a family emergency which justified his delay." This "story" might indicate a systemic employee concern that the organization values work productivity and adherence to schedule more than its personnel. Obviously, the leader

must look for trends and consistency in statements of this type to accurately attach a meaning. However, response to the questions above from a number of sources should provide a reasonable basis for analysis and conclusions.

Caroselli's methodology, however, is scant with respect to a discussion of the process of conducting the group sessions with the exception of emphasizing continuous dialogue among participants. At this point, it is appropriate to discuss the notion of effective group dialogue and its importance to the process of "building common understanding in that it allows one to see the hidden meaning of words, first by seeing such hidden meaning in our communication."⁸ In group settings focused on discerning organizational culture attributes, members must be encouraged to suspend reactions to each others' comments such that the group builds a common ground of understanding vice debating the merits of one another's ideas. Schein distinguishes dialogue from discussion by stating that discussion can often be characterized by disagreement, elaboration, and questioning of ideas such that the interchange "ultimately mires in unproductive debate."⁹ A byproduct of dialogue is an implicit rather than explicit development of group "goals, norms, influence, openness and authority (see Appendix A)."¹⁰

Schein prefaces his "deciphering culture" discussion with two primary cautions. First, the leader must be aware of internal biases, such as workforce predilection to mistrust "management," that may exist and work against a clear dialogue.¹¹ Second, a leader must "perpetually recalibrate" his/her understanding of the organizational culture to avoid missing unintentional cultural modifications which may have occurred as a result of his/her leadership.¹² Additionally, this recalibration is a systematic way of reopening dialogue within the organization to allow subordinates to express views and impressions which

may be contributing to an unhealthy environment. Recalibration also provides feedback concerning what is working within the organization and what measures the leader has taken which are successful and have been well received culturally from his subordinates.¹³

Corporate Culture Questionnaire

In their article “Assessing Organizational Culture: A Comparison of Methods,” Walker, Symon and Davies contrast two assessment methods used within one organization to determine whether similar results with respect to organizational culture issues would be manifested. In fact, a comparison of the results did suggest that both methods identify “similar aspects of the culture.”¹⁴ Our concern is with the methods themselves and their employment as assessment methodologies for determining organizational culture characteristics. The Corporate Culture questionnaire is a quantitative approach published by Saville and Holdsworth Limited in the United Kingdom and is designed to “obtain reliable quantitative information about an organization’s culture.”¹⁵ Administered to all or a representative sample of employees, the instrument evaluates 21 dimensions of culture such as “concern for quality, degree of formalization, and job involvement.”¹⁶ Key administrative advantages to this technique include a design which allows for unsupervised completion and a limited time commitment to complete the questionnaire (approximately 25 minutes). The results of the survey are aggregated and normed against a “composite norm group of UK organizations to provide a profile of the organization’s culture. Extensive statistical techniques have been applied to validate the instrument and its 21 dimensions.”¹⁷ Evaluation from a corporate perspective comes from comparing the mean scores of the respondents to the instrument dimensions against the norm group mean of 5

(scale = 1 to 10).¹⁸ The basic utility of this tool is to provide a leader with indications of possible areas of concern. For example a score of three in the dimension of “concern for quality” may indicate genuine shortfalls in quality management or it may indicate a gap in leadership’s communication of its emphasis on quality issues. The authors point out that leadership must consider the results within the context of the unique service or product associated with their organization. However, the tool would seem to provide an initial assessment of employee perceptions and areas requiring further investigation and analysis by a unit’s commander or supervisor.

The Twenty Statements Test

The Twenty Statements Test (TST) was originally developed by Kuhn and was subsequently modified by Locatelli and West to assess organizational culture.¹⁹ In their initial study comparing the TST to other qualitative methods of organizational culture evaluation, researchers found that the TST “not only generated more information than the other methods but this information also concerned deeper levels of culture.” In addition, the TST was less administratively burdensome than other assessment methods. Its qualitative nature is exhibited in two major areas: respondents are unrestricted in the type of response and they are allowed to “generate their own important concepts.”²⁰ Once a representative sample has taken the TST, statements are grouped together under headings based on the content of the responses (see Appendix B).²¹ In the case study performed by Walker, Symon, and Davies, analysis revealed definite areas of common concern such as adequacy of facilities and vertical communications.²²

The researchers note in their evaluation of TST's strengths and weaknesses that the instrument identifies "unique aspects of the organization's culture," but "may not probe the deeper levels of culture as effectively as other qualitative techniques."²³ This is traced to the lack of interaction between the data analyst and the workforce members submitting the data. Inability to delve into the 'whys' and 'what-fors' of individual responses limits the ability to derive deeper meaning from the data.²⁴ Walker et. al. conclude that "TST might best be utilized to identify the sorts of questions that need to be asked to access the deeper elements of culture, namely the unconscious assumption held by organizational member."²⁵

Additional thoughts on the assessment tools

When employing a deliberate technique, a leader must use caution and be aware of potential pitfalls. Leaders must be clear about the purpose behind such inquiries and be true to a "nonattribution" policy of sorts that ensures openness and candor in the participants. Establishment of trust among the participants whether in group settings or one-on-one is vital. In staff meetings and/or Commander's calls, a commander or supervisor should set the stage for continuous cultural dialogue by stressing his/her intent to engage in this line of inquiry. The leader should communicate that assessment of organizational culture will be a continual process and that, pursuant to gathering information to assess the culture, individuals or groups may be asked to contribute their time and thoughts.

Clement provides an additional caution related to subcultures when he notes that "though there may be a general consensus on how things should be done, variations will

occur within certain units—variations that do not violate the broader culture but which can make those particular units somewhat unique.”²⁶ Thus, a particular systems program office in Air Force Materiel Command may value pursuit of streamlining initiatives. An R&D branch may pursue these initiatives through systematic process action teams; whereas, the operations and maintenance branch may rely on individual initiatives. Subcultural difference may not be a hindrance, given the basic values, beliefs and assumptions unique to the subculture are still consistent with the overarching organizational values. Understanding the subcultures that exist and their relative importance to the effectiveness of the organization provides the leader with the information required to assess the positive or negative impact of the subcultures.

Each of the above tools by themselves present insights into aspects of the cultural aspects or characteristics of an organization. Given the concerns over assessing organizational culture and the conclusions which can be drawn from the data, perhaps a combination of the above methods is appropriate. For example, a combination of the Caroselli informal group method and the Corporate culture questionnaire conceivably could provide complimentary insights into differing aspects of an organizations culture such as artifacts, underlying basic assumptions and values. The questionnaire responses could provide additional areas to probe when convening a selected group for dialogue sessions. Walker concludes with the statement: “it is essential that the information derived from initial assessments is further explored and verified in the organization concerned.”²⁷ Complimentary tools that maximize insight into cultural factors at play in his/her organization enhance the ability of leaders to validate their conclusions based on multiple sources of information.

Notes

¹ Walker, Helen, Gillian Symon, & Bryn Davies. "Assessing Organizational Culture: A comparison of Methods." *International Journal of Selection and Assessment* 4, (1 April 1996): 96.

² Caroselli, Cynthia. "Assessment of Organizational Culture: A Tool for Professional Success." *Orthopaedic nursing* 11, (1 May 1992): 59.

³ Understanding Culture: Key messages for Leadership. *Health Progress* 76, (1 Mar 1995): 20.

⁴ Caroselli, *Assessment of Organizational Culture: A Tool for Professional Success*, 60.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Caroselli, *Assessment of Organizational Culture: A Tool for Professional Success*, 60.

⁸ Schein, Edgar H. "On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning." *Organizational Dynamics*, Autumn 1993, 47.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 175.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Walker, *Assessing Organizational Culture: A Comparison of Methods*, 103.

¹⁴ Ibid., 96.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 101.

²¹ Ibid., 101.

²² Ibid., 103.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Clement, Ronald W. "Culture, Leadership, and Power: The Keys to Organizational Change," *Business Horizons*, 1 Jan 1994, 34.

²⁶ Walker, *Assessing Organizational Culture: A comparison of Methods*, 105.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and recommendations for further research

Organizational Culture research is still in its infancy as it relates to the line commander or supervisor assessing his/her unit's culture and that culture's impact on unit performance. However, plenty of research exists to support the argument that a strong organizational culture factors into leadership's ability to maintain or develop a well functioning organization. In the process of gathering data for this research paper and drawing conclusions, several areas of further research come to mind.

First, tools for organizational culture assessment, such as those discussed above, should be applied in a military organizational setting to discern their utility and value-added to the leader's understanding of his/her organization. A case study wherein one or more of the tools above are applied to an organization with resultant conclusions drawn and actions taken could provide data to analyze the real benefit of such assessments.

Second, research should be conducted to explore the degree to which aspects of culture are being used by today's military leaders in applying their leadership strategy. Intuition and common sense suggest that each leader practices some degree of organizational assessment upon entering into an assignment. Strong leaders may exhibit a greater propensity for such analysis, albeit through a more informal and unstructured approach than the methods described herein. Interviews with today's Air Force leaders

could reveal the extent to which this is true and allow for a conclusive value judgment on the need for such formal methods as those described above to assist leaders in such assessments.

Finally, further research relating the organizational culture concept to Quality Air Force (QAF) initiatives may be appropriate to ascertain the concept's potential contribution to that effort. Westbrook states that "culture is the "hidden agenda of TQM" but is "underestimated and frequently overlooked."¹ If this statement is true, organizational culture could provide a key element in the evaluation of QAF and its acceptance among organizations which comprise the Air Force.

This research summarizes a number of issues related to organizational culture. Issues such as defining organizational culture, the ability to uncover underlying basic assumptions inherent in an organization, and qualitative versus quantitative assessments and their usefulness, are discussed briefly to allow for a more extensive discussion of methods of assessment. To apply formal methods of organizational culture assessment, practitioners should understand in more depth these aspects and other issues that comprise the organizational culture body of knowledge. Ultimately, the need for such in-depth knowledge by Air Force leaders will be determined by those who pass final judgment on its practical use.

Schein states in the preface to his seminal work, "Organizational Culture and Leadership," that "we must come to understand fully what culture is all about in human groups, organizations, and nations so that we can have a much deeper understanding of what goes on, why it goes on, and what, if anything, we can do about it."² In today's rapidly changing and communication/information intensive environment, to do less will

handicap leadership's ability to deal with these dynamics and truly prioritize our people as "the most important element of the Air Force's success in capitalizing on change."³

Notes

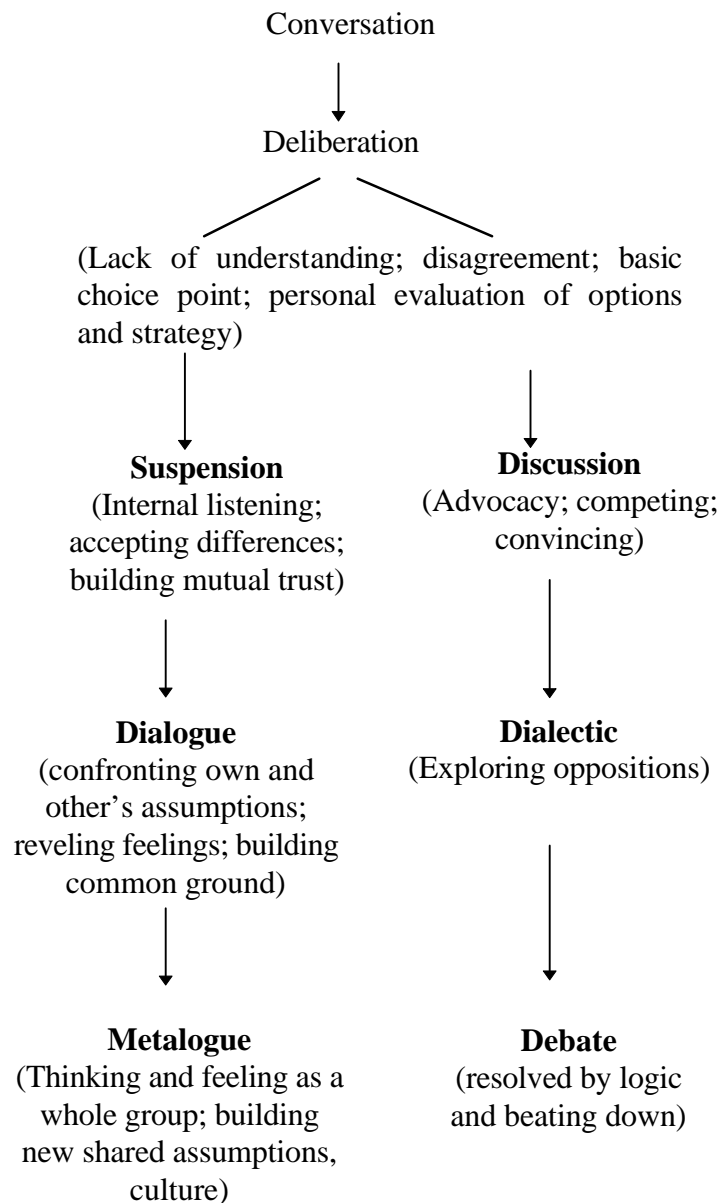
¹ Westbrook, Jerry D. "Organizational Culture And Its Relationship To TQM: An organization wishing to implement TQM must first look at its culture," *Industrial management* 35, (1 Jan 1993): 3.

² Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, iv.

³ *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force*, 19.

Appendix A

Schein's Ways of Talking Together



Appendix B

TST Instrument and Sample Results Table

In the twenty spaces below please complete the twenty statement beginning “This [wing, squadron, division, branch etc.]...” with a few words which you think describe your unit. These can be about anything that you want. There are no right or wrong answers. Write your answers in the order that they come to you and do not worry about logic or importance. Go along fairly fast.

Please complete as many statements as you can, but do not worry if you can not fill all twenty. These statements will help to show how you view the company, and the issues that are important to you.

1. This [wing, squadron, division, branch etc.]
2. This [wing, squadron, division, branch etc.]
3. This [wing, squadron, division, branch etc.]
- etc.

Work procedures	
RESPONSE	# OF RESPONDENTS
This unit needs to improve quality	19
This unit is not efficient	14
This unit regards quality as more important than quantity	14
This unit feels that quality is important	10
This unit needs to reorganize it procedures	9
This unit is not flexible enough	8
This unit is flexible	8

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